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## THE DISTINCTIVE BELIEFS OF THE FIRST CHRISTIANS.

WHEN one considers how dependent upon him Jesus' followers were, how imperfectly they apprehended his teaching, *TEMPORARY DESPAIR AT JESUS' DEATH* and how hostile were the forces of opposition, it does not seem surprising that consternation fell upon the disciple group when Jesus was put to death. The Pharisees and Sadducees expected that his ignominious execution would put an end to the movement. But Jesus fully guarded against such a result. He did not place himself in the hands of his enemies until he saw that the disciples were firmly grounded in faith in him, and adequately instructed, as well as sufficiently inspired, for continuing his work. He repeatedly spoke to them of "his departure which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem;" and although at first they were thrown into despair by the awful event, they quickly regained their assurance, and went about the work which now rested upon them alone.

The gospels record how the confidence and courage of the disciples were restored by visions of their risen Lord, who *BELIEF IN CHRIST AS RISEN AND EXALTED* explained to them the necessity of his death, gave them grounds for a firm belief that he lived again, told them that from heaven he would conduct his cause, and sent them forth to preach the gospel to all mankind. They seem never to have doubted that Jesus in spirit actually attended them through the subsequent years of trial and labor.

The Spirit (through which he worked) comforted, guided, protected, instructed them. They felt themselves to be co-workers with Christ in a cause whose triumph was assured, and in every stage of which God's wisdom and power were manifest, working out his eternal purposes.

Acting on this certain knowledge that their Master was still with them, now in the spirit as formerly in the flesh, they bent themselves with full energy to the task set before them, to convince men of his messiahship, to bring them into obedience to his teaching, and to prepare as many as possible for the coming of their Lord. For this strenuous duty he had on the memorable day of Pentecost empowered them; a special outpouring of the Spirit had given them the necessary equipment of wisdom and power. They did not hesitate to obey God rather than men; they were unshaken in their faith and unfaltering in their devotion to their Master's cause. As he had commanded them to be his witnesses "in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth," they set about the performance of the great commission with a singleness of purpose and a courage which have never been equaled. The book of Acts is designed to show how this world-mission was accomplished; stage by stage it is narrated how the disciples of Jesus carried the gospel from Jerusalem through Palestine, Syria, Asia Minor, Greece, and Italy; until, when Rome—the great capital of the empire—was reached, the writer felt that the command of Jesus had been fully obeyed, and he brought his book to an end.

Further, the first disciples were profoundly impressed with the thought that they must personally and socially achieve the ideal of life which Jesus had taught them. Had not Jesus devoted his public ministry to teaching the fundamental religious truths and moral principles according to which men must live? Not that they completely understood his ideal of life, not that they could quickly realize that ideal; but that it was their absorbing aim to love God and their fellow-men, to become good according

to Jesus' standard, and to render a Christ-like service to the world. The words of Jesus' teaching had become fixed in the minds of his disciples, and the disciples passed them on to new converts as the number of Christians increased. We read that the three thousand who were persuaded of Jesus' messiahship on the day of Pentecost "continued in the apostles' teaching," by which in all probability is meant the setting forth to them of the words, deeds, and events of Jesus' ministry. Particularly the words, for there is specific testimony to the fact that the sayings of Jesus were cherished most of all. It was in his teaching that they found their guide to right belief and right conduct, as well as their stimulus and inspiration to the ideal life. The foundation of their Christianity was the facts of the gospel history, and these facts—of which Jesus' personality and teaching were the primary element—constituted the norm of all their belief and practice. Our present gospels are the outcome of the faithful adherence of the first Christians to the gospel story.

In their effort to achieve the ideal life which Jesus taught and exemplified, there grew up among the Christians a close and loving fellowship, a true sympathy and unity of action, and a mutual helpfulness which extended to the voluntary sharing of their earthly goods with those brethren who were in need. With the sincere striving to fulfil their Master's injunction to "seek first the kingdom of God," there came joy, peace, and blessing. The community feeling was strong and true, for had they not a common Lord, a common work, a common hope?

It is clear that all the Christians of the first generation expected the speedy return of Christ. He had set up the kingdom on earth, but he had gone before its consummation; therefore he certainly would soon return to complete his work. Surely, they thought, he could not long delay his second coming to claim his own, and to establish truth and righteousness in the world where holiness met persecution and wickedness seemed triumphant. The disciples felt that the leavening of the

**BELIEF IN  
THE IMMINENT  
RETURN OF  
CHRIST**

whole lump by the gospel already implanted was too slow a process; before that could take place Christ would come again, the divine judgment would be pronounced and executed against the sinful, and almighty power would perfect the kingdom of the saints.

It was not that Jesus had assured them of a speedy return, for this he seems not to have done. He is reported to have said distinctly that he did not know when his second coming would be (Mark 13:32). But the very uncertainty in which he left them as to the time, gave them room to hope that his return would be soon, and this hope kindled into a burning expectation. They were mistaken—the consummation was not to be so soon as they thought, for Jesus had plainly implied in his teaching that the kingdom of God must gradually grow into perfection rather than be perfected by a catastrophic intervention of God. But the illusion served a good purpose, since the belief in the imminent return of Christ cheered the hearts of the faithful disciples, increased their devotion to the cause, stimulated them to arduous labors for their fellow-men, and filled them with zeal to be wholly ready for his coming.

Beneath this new superstructure of Christian belief and practice which grew out of their discipleship to Jesus, there stood the foundation of Judaism. The first Christians were loyal Jews, and in the earlier years they did not consider themselves as cut off from the nation to which by birth they belonged. At a later time the trend of events and the outworking of the gospel truths and principles were to make of the Christians a separate people. But in the first years they were in all respects faithful adherents to the religion and worship of their fathers. Their Christianity they regarded as supplemental to their Judaism; that it was in fact a rival religion they had not yet believed. Jesus certainly showed that the gospel was to be the successor of Judaism, and Stephen at an early date saw this truth. Yet the first Christians held to both. It was Paul first of all who, following the teaching of Jesus, brought men to

LOYALTY TO  
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SCRIPTURES

recognize that the universality and the pure spirituality of the gospel constituted it an independent and superior religion.

But neither in the earlier nor in the later stage was it necessary for the Christians to abandon the Hebrew Scriptures. They continued to use the Old Testament, and they delighted to find that so many of its aspirations and predictions were fulfilled in the gospel history. Jesus had shown his disciples how the Old Testament was to be rightly used and interpreted; and the Christians followed him (the best they could) in this truer reading of the book. The Old Testament continued to be the Scriptures of the Christian movement; and even when at a later time Christian writings arose, and there came into existence an added group of Christian Scriptures, the Old Testament still retained its place among the disciples of Jesus.

The primitive Christians were, indeed, a remarkable company. To their intelligence, spirituality, and labors we owe the permanence of Jesus' work; through them we have received the narratives which present Jesus to us and narrate his ministry; it was they who in large measure achieved the ideal of life which Jesus taught and exemplified, setting it forth on its transforming mission in the world. Their zeal for Christ, their loyalty to the new revelation of truth and goodness, their faithfulness in the supremely difficult task of preaching the gospel to a great and hostile world, their joyful courage in perplexity and persecution, their steadfast vision of a new era when the kingdom shall be fully established—all these facts and qualities bid us recognize in them a company of believers high above the plane of ordinary Christians, worthy in many respects of our highest emulation, and deserving of our fullest love and praise.

*THE EMINENCE  
OF THE FIRST  
CHRISTIANS*